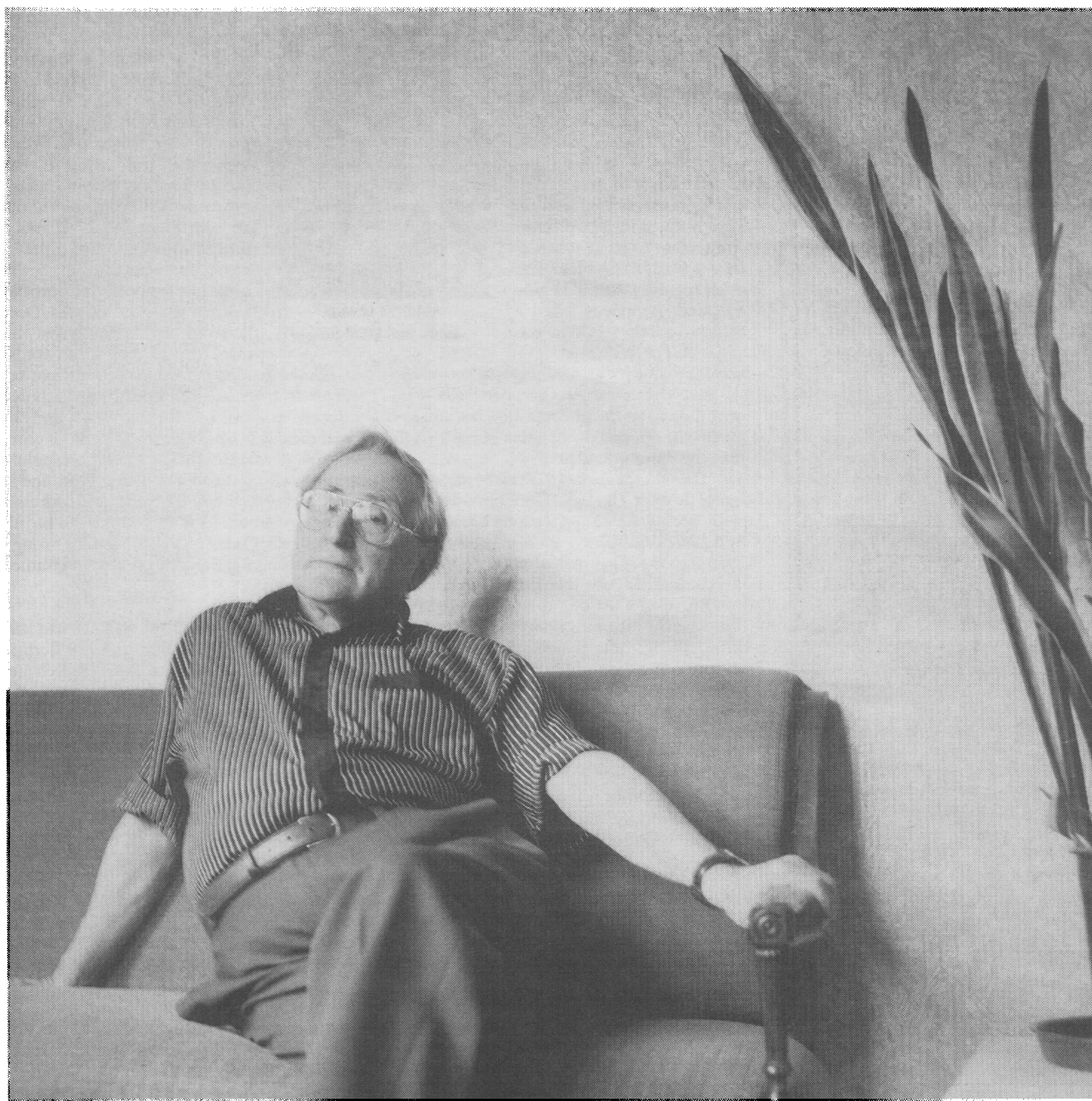


# Gad's War

A GAY HOLOCAUST HERO WILL RIDE IN THIS YEAR'S PRIDE PARADE



Underground leader Gad Beck: "I was so strong because I had love all the time."

## By Mark Schoofs

Gad Beck, 74, is describing his first great love and laughing about the bedbugs. His lover Manfred Lewin lived in a poor Berlin neighborhood, and Manfred's apartment, where the couple spent their nights, was overrun with bugs. But the two were so in love—Gad was 19 and Manfred 20—that they simply couldn't hold out. "We were scratching all the time," Gad chuckles. Then, with a stab of seriousness, he says, "Later I missed them."

It was October 1942, and Hitler's trains were hauling Jews east. The young lovers were both Jewish, but Gad's uncle had prepared a basement hideout in a country house that they could use. One afternoon Gad showed up

at Manfred's apartment, but he and almost everyone else were gone. Manfred's two remaining brothers explained that the family had been taken to a transit camp awaiting deportation and they themselves were going the next day.

After a panicky night, Gad went to Manfred's boss, who ran a house-painting business. He suggested that Gad dress up in his son's Hitler Youth uniform and try to rescue Manfred. Gad is small—barely five foot three—and the boss's son stood over six feet. No matter. Rolling things up and tucking things under, Gad marched into the transit camp, which happened to be

at his old school. The site of his "wonderful childhood memories" was now the last stop before Theresienstadt and Auschwitz.

"Where is the Jew Manfred Israel Lewin?" Gad barked. "He is a saboteur!" By insisting that Manfred had hidden paint and keys to apartments that needed work, Gad convinced the Gestapo officer to give him temporary custody of his lover. The couple walked out into freedom.

On the street, Gad gave Manfred 20 marks and told him to meet up at his uncle's hiding place. Manfred took the money. "But then he said, 'Gad, I can never leave my family.

Can I be free if my old mother and father are in there?' And he went back to the camp."

Out of the whole family, not one came back.

As he watched Manfred walk away, Gad decided "I have to fight."

**BY 1943, GAD WAS THE LEADER** of *Chug Chaluzi*—the Pioneer Group—which was part of the Europe-wide Zionist resistance movement *Hechalutz*, the Pioneers. Gad's group had about 15 core members, including his twin sister Miriam, and more than 60 loosely affiliated partisans. They helped Jews hide from the Gestapo, finding them "rooms for the night, false papers, food, clothes, everything."

Gad was classified as a *Mischling*—a half-Jew—which gave him a sliver of freedom that he exploited to the fullest. In 1943 he assumed a false identity, living under the nom de guerre Günther Kaplan—"a good Catholic name," he laughs. Gad estimates his group helped more than 100 Jews.

He knew that he was saving them from death, but he didn't know the full horror. In an interview with Klaus Müller of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum last year, Gad recalled a letter from a friend in Birkenau. "There was a sentence that I didn't understand at all. It said, 'It would all be bearable if only the chimneys didn't smoke so much.'"

After the war, Gad helped ferry Jews to Palestine, fought in Israel's war for independence, and settled in Tel Aviv. He worked as a psychologist and social worker, and knew David Ben Gurion, Martin Buber, and other leading figures. In 1978 he returned to his native Berlin to teach German high school students about Jewish culture.

"We have this glib way of talking about unsung heroes," says author Peter Wyden, who interviewed Gad and many other members of the underground for his bestselling book, *Stella*. "Well, Gad Beck really was a hero, and he's not sung about very much."

That is changing. Gad has published the first of a two-volume memoir in Germany; he was the keynote speaker when the U.S. Holocaust Museum dedicated its gay and lesbian fund last year; and he will ride in this year's New York Gay Pride Parade and speak at the gay synagogue, Beth Simchat Torah.

In the vast historical account of the Holocaust, gays and lesbians have been mostly absent. Historians now estimate that between 5000 and 10,000 were killed—many after being condemned to "destruction through work" in the camps—and hundreds more were castrated.

To inflict such atrocities, the Nazis first had to demolish the Weimar Republic's vibrant gay movement. Its capital was Berlin, home to more than 100 gay bars, a lesbian and gay bookstore, and several gay political organizations, including the influential Institute for Sexual Studies, the first modern gay rights group. In January 1933, Hitler was named chancellor of Germany. By mid May, the Nazis had closed most of the city's gay bars, looted the Institute for Sexual Studies, and burned its books.

All this occurred before Gad's 10th birthday. Perhaps as a result, the threats he remembers were not aimed at his sexuality. In Hitler's first year in power, classmates stopped sitting next to him, claiming he stank like a Jew. He was 15 on Kristallnacht, when the Nazis torched synagogues and looted Jewish stores. The next morning he went to his job at a tailor's shop, where he found the clothes strewn in the street and soiled with shit. When he was 18, the systematic deportation of Berlin's Jews started, and he witnessed friends being herded into cattle cars.

So while the gay movement is claiming Gad, and while he clearly enjoys its embrace, he also has misgivings. He quips that in the Gay Pride Parade, "I will be a puppet, riding in an open car, waving like the British queen." But in the war, "being gay was not so important."

Gad means this both personally and politically. He declares he is "a real gay," joking

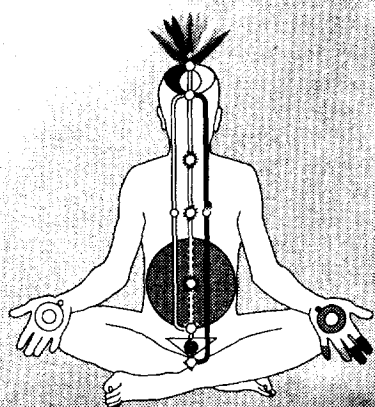
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## SCHOOLS

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that the only female he has taken to bed is his pet poodle. But he says that none of his many lovers during the war was gay. Indeed, Gad objects when he hears that Ferdinand Kroh, who has written extensively about the Jewish underground, says "there were many homosexuals" in Gad's resistance group. "I slept with many of them," counters Gad, "but they are not homosexual." Müller chuckles, "It didn't make a difference if someone was gay or straight, Gad had an affair with them anyway!"

As in love, so in war: Gad did not fight the Nazis out of a sense of gay solidarity. In fact, few people did. Despite the advances of the Weimar years, says Müller, gays "weren't used to a collective response." For example, a Dutch homosexual, Wellem Arondeus, helped blow up a government registry office in Amsterdam to make it harder for the Nazis to find Jews and other fugitives. Before he was executed, Arondeus asked a friend to tell the world he was gay, so that people would know homosexuals were as courageous as heterosexuals. But even this man, says historian Pieter Koeners, didn't join the underground because gays were being oppressed, but rather out of "pity for Jews and those around him."

There were exceptions. Klaus Mann, the gay son of novelist Thomas Mann, opposed Hitler partly because he was persecuting homosexuals. And there were isolated acts of gay resistance: In 1936, a group of gay men stopped the arrest of a homosexual in a park, then fled into exile.

But Gad's reasons for fighting become clear when he mentions a drag bar that operated during the war. He avoided the club, but not because going there might reveal him as queer; rather, he worried that an out-of-uniform SS officer might see his circumcised penis. In the hierarchy of terror, the primary danger was Hitler's "final solution" to the "Jewish question." Manfred was killed not because he was gay but because he was a Jew.

But if his homosexuality wasn't why Gad fought, it influenced *how* he fought. His love for Manfred galvanized him to action, and his irrepressible libido helped him make important contacts. Mixing audacity, passion, and luck, he capered like a leprechaun through the capital of the Third Reich.

This becomes apparent watching him now. He is, quite simply, the biggest flirt in Berlin. He frequents old-world coffeehouses, bantering with all the male waiters. They are thoroughly charmed, just as his boss was, half a century ago.

**HERR WÄHLISCH WAS IN CHARGE OF** a team of Jews forced to clean up the rubble from Allied bombings. It was backbreaking work, but Wählich noticed Gad wearing glasses and so asked if he could type. Though he couldn't, Gad answered, "Of course," and started work as a secretary. But his deception threatened to catch up with him when Wählich complained that Gad wasn't getting anything done. A colleague interceded, saying, "Ease up, it's his birthday." Wählich softened, took Gad to a coffeehouse, and bought him an ice cream. Then, suddenly, he put his hand on Gad's. In a split-second decision—"Do you know the chance I was taking? I did not know this German!"—Gad told him, "I am a leader of the Jewish underground."

The gamble paid off: Wählich supplied all kinds of help, including a large truck—"like a circus van," Gad recalls—in which Jews could hide or simply rest. This was particularly important, because the bombing was destroying "streets and streets and streets," and finding new hideouts posed a huge problem.

Wählich and Gad had a sexual relation-

ship, and "there was real love." That's how Gad describes virtually all his affairs. In a revealing moment, he says, "I was so strong because I had love all the time." He is not just talking about sex, which he says is something "you can have with a dog." No matter how fleeting the liaison, "I hope I took the sex to love." This attitude, explains Müller, was partly a survival technique: "In extreme situations people need support and love, and sex can be an expression of that."

But Gad's need for affection never undermined his work. "I was very realistic," he says. "I looked not for friends, but for help." And he needed a lot of help. On average, historians estimate, it took 10 gentiles to keep one Jew hidden from the Nazis. Often, aid had to be bought—more than a million marks were funneled in to Gad's group from Switzerland—but sometimes it took more than money. On one occasion, an engineer named Dreyer rented out an apartment for 27 marks a month—and sex two times a week. In a pinch, the apartment could give temporary refuge to half a dozen Jews, so Gad paid. Does he resent it? Hardly. "What this man did for us, there are no words."

Some gentiles helped for no payment besides a clean conscience. A prostitute harbored a deeply religious Jew for two years, and she saved the day in one of the most perilous crises to befall Gad's group. The Gestapo caught a member who was about to deliver food, and in his pocket was a list of 32 names and addresses of Jews in hiding. "And this wonderful prostitute," recalls Gad, "rode her bicycle through Berlin, all burning from the bombs, and warned each of them."

**THE PROSTITUTE MARRIED THE MAN** she had harbored, who became the first leader of Berlin's postwar Jewish community. But Wählich and Dreyer met terrible ends. Despite Gad's protests, Wählich was shot by the Russians for overseeing forced labor, and Dreyer was captured by the Nazis, who sicced attack dogs on him—they mutilated his ears and genitals.

Three months before the war ended, Gad was captured and imprisoned in a Gestapo bunker. A bomb blew up his cell, wounding him. He was sent to the Jewish Hospital, which was also a major detention camp. In a desperate attempt to keep him from being returned to the bunker, where he was more likely to be executed, the doctors deliberately didn't treat him, letting his fever rage and giving him only painkillers.

Despite his condition, two Jewish sisters came to him in a panic, warning that the SS were planning to kill a thousand Jews for Hitler's birthday, April 20. "I was half dead," Gad recalls, "but I had a vision." With the Russians advancing swiftly on Berlin, he suggested telling the Gestapo chief that he could avoid Russian revenge if a thousand Jews testified that he spared their lives. The Jews were set free.

Not Gad, however, nor the young man, Zwi Abrahamsohn, who would be his lover for 21 years after the war. They were taken to the bunker. "Zwi is crying because all our friends are free. What could I say? If we two are not liberated, maybe that's the price for the others. But you cannot say this to a boy."

The Russians were in the city now. The SS officers fled, leaving the cell unlocked. But Gad, wounded and feverish, couldn't leave. Zwi went out, but quickly returned, for the Battle of Berlin was raging on the streets right above them. "In comes a Russian soldier, eyes blazing, blood on his head, blood on his arm. He said, 'Is the one named Gad Beck here?' I could only lift one hand. He fell down, and said, 'Brother, you are free.'"

Gad Beck will speak at the Pride Shabbat, at NYU's Loeb Center, 566 LaGuardia Place, Friday, June 27, 8 p.m. (929-9498)



Manfred Lewin,  
Gad's first great love

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